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# The Rationality of Supporting Aston Villa

David Edward Rose

It is some time ago now since I perceived that, from my earliest years, I have supported without question Aston Villa above all other football teams and followed their fortunes with an avid partial interest, but I also perceived such support was based on insecure origins, so I resolved to undertake seriously once in my life to begin afresh from the foundations, if I wished to justify something firm and constant in my life that constitutes such a central part of my identity.

—after *Meditations on First Philosophy* by René Descartes

## *Supporting and doing*

There are a few, but very real, oddities about my support of Aston Villa. If I were asked why, I would be at an initial loss to respond: I am too distant to attend home games and rarely travel to Villa Park; I do not now nor have ever lived in Birmingham or even in the West Midlands; nor were any members of my family or my friends ever Villa supporters; and the support in question began at a very, very early age. The denouement of this chapter may well reveal an error made on my part in my infancy concerning a 1978 Panini sticker book (those wonderful books which were never filled with the players' stickers no matter how many ten pence packets—with free bubblegum!—were bought from the local newsagent).

What, you might well be wondering, do such personal ruminations have to do with philosophy? You may not care why David Rose supports Aston Villa and have no interest in finding out why he does. Surely he should be musing in a more appropriate context: in the pub amongst friends or on the psychiatrist's couch (since it seems so very important to him!). However, if you are reading this book, you probably support a football team. And your support for that team makes you act in certain ways: you cheer when that team scores and groan when that team concedes. Your reaction to other teams scoring also relates to the support of your team: whether you move up or down the league table or whether they are your team's bitterest rivals, for example. Your support of that team dictates certain behavioural patterns. If you support Aston Villa, you ought to—all things being equal—rejoice when they score. The support of that team constitutes a part of your identity and determines both how you *do* and how you *should* behave.

A bit like ethics.

What is right or wrong is for the most part due to a tradition and a culture. You have found yourself inheriting a particular set of values that you share with your fellow 'supporters' and these values dictate how and when you show approval or disapproval. For example, we collectively boo when the opportunities of a minority are curtailed just because they happen to be a minority and we collectively cheer when the government is judged offside when it tries to store information about innocents' genetic material. We do this because these judgements stand in a rational relationship to the claims that liberty and equality are values worth maintaining and promoting. We support the whole Western

team of liberty, equality and so on. We also disapprove of different values held by other supporters; we see those values as making no sense and the actions of the supporters as wrong. So, for example, individuals from another society may well withhold the right to vote from women because they reject the belief that men and women are equal and instead hold that men know what is best for their female relatives. But the only difference seems to be that they were raised in a specific culture and we were raised in another.

They support one team and we support another.

Hold on a minute, though. Someone, perhaps you, might want to argue that morality and supporting a football team are just different kinds of things. We tend to think that the values which constitute our moral identities as something more than a gift of a tradition or a contingency of our births. I may well be an atheist because I am born into a secular, post-industrial culture, but no matter where I was born or how I was educated, I would surely think that liberty matters or that hurting others without any good reason is just wrong. I would think so even if I were born into a pre-industrial, theocratic culture. We would like to believe that the values—liberty, equality, compassion, welfare—we hold are somehow rational and not mere historical accidents, passed down to us because we live in the area, or because my dad believes them, or because I happen to abide by them every match day. We tend to think that they are true and that they can be justified to all rational agents; that if someone refuses to acknowledge them, then we can just stop talking to him because he has denied our values at the cost of his own rationality. You might want to hold that we are a human being in spite of all the cultural and social pressures which batter against us and our very humanity commits us to certain patterns of behaviour that all human beings, if they were rational and moral, would endorse.

Well, at least this is the normal way we think about things. On the one hand, morality is like supporting a football team because we just happen to adopt certain patterns of behaviour due to historical and geographical luck; but, on the other hand, morality is unlike supporting a football team because we can justify our commitments because they are rational and not just accidental. So, we ordinarily think of ethical positions as rational and football support as non-rational (that is, neither rational nor irrational, just a brute contingent fact).

But is it as simple as all that? Morality is perhaps more akin to supporting a football team than we philosophers are loathe to admit and, what is perhaps most interesting, is that ethics is all the better for such a kinship.

*What you ought to do*

Let's at least try to be rational about this. For the most part the team who one supports is a hereditary or geographical 'gift' from your tradition. You just happen to support them and have never felt the need to justify that support. I ought to cheer when Aston Villa score *if I happen to be an Aston Villa fan*. And *I just happen to be an Aston Villa fan*. There is no compelling rational reason to be an Aston Villa fan (or even a football fan *per se*). Let us pretend that this is different in kind from the system of ethical values we endorse. It is not the case I ought to deplore discrimination against women *if I happen to be a member of, say, the secular English liberal tradition*. It is rather that I ought to deplore discrimination against women because it is immoral and being a human being, I am (not happen to be, just am!) a moral agent.

It's possible that the difference between being an Aston Villa supporter and being a moral agent is the difference between two different senses of the word 'ought' and this is the origin of our confusion. When we say, "an Aston Villa fan ought to cheer a goal," we mean, "for Aston Villa supporters the most probable or normal course of action on their scoring a goal is to cheer." If a supporter doesn't cheer, then his deviation from the norm is explained by an appeal to other factors: he's on anti-depressants, his dog died that morning, and so on. However, when we say, "You ought to help the man in distress," we mean that, "It is right or good that you help the man in distress." When passersby see a person needing help on the street, they will in most probability pass them by, but that don't make it the right thing to do! They *ought to* help even if, in all probability, they won't.

Then again, if the agent doesn't help, there may be good reasons why not. If asked, he may reply, "I'm rushing to fetch my friend the MD," or, "He isn't that badly hurt and I am carrying blood to the hospital for a small, dying child." It seems that, although the value of compassion ought to be accepted by all moral agents, the actual behaviour of the moral agent is also a probable event. So, there is no real difference in the use of ought at this level of explanation of behaviour. Whereas "You ought to help" (and its equivalent, "You ought to support Aston Villa") refers to one use of the word "ought", both "You ought treat his wounds" (and its equivalent, "You ought to cheer when Villa score") refers to another use, that is probable behaviour given certain conditions.

For all that, something doesn't seem quite right. In the first case, it is possible for someone to say (and say rationally), "I didn't cheer because I don't support Villa." But the statement, "You ought to help," is different because we cannot truly say (and remain rational), "I didn't help him because I'm not a moral agent." The deviations from the norm were explained in terms consistent with moral action: the best course of action, if we want to improve the man's welfare, is to fetch my doctor friend rather than help him myself. If you support Aston Villa, you ought to conform to certain expectations of behaviour. If you are moral, you ought to conform to certain expectations of behaviour. But, where we can say, "You ought to be moral," meaningfully in rational argument, we cannot do so with the statement, "You ought to support Aston Villa."

Or, can we?

### *The Rose-calcio scale*

Both being a moral agent and being an Aston Villa supporter commits us to certain expected behaviour. However, we think that we *all* ought to be moral agents. Could there be any real sense to the phrase, "You ought to be an Aston Villa supporter"? If I am a supporter of Aston Villa, I must be committed to watching them on TV in preference to other sides, going to the stadium given half a chance and willing them to win. It would not be unintelligible to make such prescriptions. I must also be committed to statements such as, "Aston Villa scoring a goal is good." Let me list the main reasons I have for supporting Aston Villa which would stand in some sort of rational relationship to the statement, "Aston Villa scoring a goal is good":

1. They were my local team;
2. They won the European Cup in 1982;
3. I liked the colour of the strip;

4. They are the best team full stop (or period for the US audience);
5. They are the best team where 'best' is evidenced by their success (number of championships, FA cups and European cups);
6. They are the best team where 'best' is evidenced by their glorious history and tradition;
7. They are the best team where 'best' is evidenced by their identification with legendary players (Eusebio, Maradona, Zidane...);
8. They are the best team where 'best' is evidenced by their playing the best football.

Let's look at each of these in turn. 1 is empirically false (in my case). Psychologically, 2 may well have had an impact on me in my infancy (I would have been nine years old) since events in our childhood do determine later commitments and beliefs. However, I distinctly remember that the day after the final a 'friend' of mine spitefully declaring that Villa didn't deserve to win and that Munich were robbed (on watching the game recently, he certainly had a case), so I was already a supporter prior to the game. That leaves 3, which I'll come back to (but please don't hastily scoff until you get the full story!). It is obvious, though, that 3 could be a reason for me but not for you (and definitely not for my Italian wife who *knows a priori* that the colours of claret and blue clash). But none of these reasons *justify* supporting Aston Villa – that is, give a reason to do so, if you do not – only perhaps *explain* why I (David Rose) support Villa. They are all reasons *for me* to support Aston Villa but not for anyone else.

4 is probably false or at best controversial, although the use of the word 'best' is one we ought to think about as reasons 5 through 8 seek to do. If I say that the steak is the tastiest dish on the menu, or that it is 'better' to buy a house with a garden than without, then I am offering reasons to do certain actions rather than others; reasons for both myself and other people. And with football teams, it could be possible to say that Aston Villa is the best team where 'best' is given some sort of quantifiable definition.

Unfortunately, none of these are applicable to Villa. Success has been sparse except for the European cup in 1982, so 5 is false. History and tradition are probably just a vaguer version of measurable success since those teams with the most glorious histories (Real Madrid, Inter Milan, Liverpool and so on) are generally those with the most competition wins. To cite legendary players, as in 7, also offers no reason to support Villa: the players who I can personally cite from my thirty-six years' experience are Peter Withe, Gary Shaw, Nigel Spink, Gordon Cowans, Paul McGrath and David Platt and none of these fit the epithet 'legendary'. The first three were also immortalized by the victory in the European Cup and most legendary players belong to winning sides (as the perceived difference between Zidane and Cantona attests), so competition wins again remains the best quantifiable way to select the 'best' team. Finally, number 8 is definitely false in Villa's case and, in addition, is problematic in two ways. We would find it hard to all agree on what the 'best' type of football was: total football, catenaccio, long ball, wingless wonders, and so on. Of course, one way to resolve the contested nature of playing the best football is to say the team that plays the best football is the most successful one and so we return to number of competition wins. There is, however, a further problem: even if we could agree on a criterion for the best football and it were true that Aston Villa played the best football, then perhaps they played the best football this season but won't the next and if this were the reason, then I would yo-yo between

teams. I would be a Villa supporter one moment, an Arsenal supporter the next, then my head would be tilted by Ajax and finally seduced by Barça. As is readily apparent, no such yo-yo could ever be considered as the behaviour of a true supporter.

So, is it possible to stand back and apply the one rational or ‘transcendental’ (that is, not due to our social circumstances or cultural upbringing) reason to choose the team who ‘score’ the most points in terms of success measured by competition wins (that is number 5)? Could I conceivably use my reason to override my allegiance and ask other supporters to do likewise? Such a reasoner would not be a real supporter, not in the sense in which we use the word (or, at best, they would be a Man United fan). Try walking into your local club or pub and stating openly: “Look, I once supported Aston Villa, but they scored only three points on the Rose-calcio scale and Real Madrid scored a whopping 546. I am now a Madrid supporter and, if you were rational, you would be so too.” To change allegiances according to reason is to contradict something integral to what it means to be a football supporter at all.

### *Torturing children is bad*

And comparing the statement, “Aston Villa scoring a goal is good,” with the moral statement, “The torture of children is bad,” seemingly reveals the difference between being a supporter and being an ethical agent. What could be the logical foundations of a moral belief? Here’s a list:

- A. My friends, family and culture agree that torturing children is wrong;
- B. In 1953, a child torture ring was exposed and it was horrifying for society at large;
- C. A society that condemns and prohibits the torture of children is more stable than one that does not and a stable society is something we want;
- D. I don’t like the torturing of children, it is unpleasant;
- E. It is just wrong to torture children full stop;
- F. The torture of children is harmful to their welfare;
- G. If asked, the children would express the wish not to be tortured, so they would not consent to the practice and if you do then torture them, you are infringing their liberty to decide what to do.

Now, A isn’t a good reason. What if my friends and family believed otherwise? Would the torture then not be bad? B makes the wrongness of the action contingent on an historical event and if it hadn’t happened (or hadn’t been exposed), then torturing children would be fine. And beneath A and B, we see an old logical fallacy—the genetic fallacy: explaining how a belief came about is not the same as justifying a belief. If you just happen to think that torturing children is wrong because your culture thinks it is wrong, that does not justify your belief (that is, demonstrate why it is true), it only explains why you believe something to be true. C also poses a problem. Imagine that society could be made stable by the wholesale and gratuitous torture of children. Would you happily pick up the pliers? D is unpalatable: the torturer could conceivably find it pleasant, so a reason for you is no reason for him to stop and surely you want to make the statement, “You (and me) ought not to torture children.” Imagine the nonsensical rant: “You say ‘I like cheese,’ but you can’t like cheese, you ought not to like cheese, because it is horrible....”

Herein apparently lays the difference between supporting and being ethical. On

the one hand, there can be reasons for me to support a football team, that explain the historical or personal circumstances of supporting Aston Villa, but no reasons why anyone ought to support them. These 'reasons' are explanations and not justifications. You support a team and that is just a contingent historical fact—it is trivial—even if it can be explained. On the other hand, there are reasons for *all of us* to support the values of liberty, equality and welfare and to let them determine our behaviour whether this be because liberty is a good, or welfare is a good or human beings are autonomous and so on and so forth.

And morality is different because it can offer reasons for all of us to behave in a certain way. But what are these reasons? E is incomplete because saying something is wrong 'full stop' is a bit like saying a team is the best 'full stop' without saying what 'best' or 'wrong' actually means. Both F and G aspire to put some meat on the bones of what 'wrong' may actually mean. F may strike some of you as a good reason: pain is obviously bad and so torture is bad since it causes pain. But what about a surgical operation which causes pain? Ah, you say, but short term pain can be traded off against long term benefits, in terms of welfare. Welfare not pain is what we are actually interested in. Whose welfare matters? Everyone's, you say, otherwise I wouldn't care about children being tortured unless they were my own or I had to watch. So, I ask, is the torture of the terrorist's child justified if it will reveal where he has planted the bomb that will kill thousands unless it is found? We still need a way to decide what to do even if we agree welfare matters.

G is sort of Kantian, but we force children to take their medicine, to eat their greens and we don't let them watch *Ben 10* with little or no consideration of their wishes. We could say that it is what they *really* wanted, even if they were unaware of it ("I know the medicine tastes horrible, but it will make you better, so you *do want* to take it!"), but that means there is a 'true' self with preferences, wishes, projects and reasons that they (and we!) may not be aware of and others may know better than themselves (or even ourselves).

Seemingly there are good reasons not to torture children and these are reasons all agents will recognize if they are rational. These good reasons are determined by asking not what 'me' as a particular agent would want, but what a rational agent would want or value or prescribe. There are special procedures for doing this: the impartial spectator of utilitarians or the original position of latter day Kantians, for example. These are the procedures for finding out what we (and others) *really* want and not what we just *happen* to want. The benevolent spectator holds that we ought to put aside our particular preferences and our own commitments and projects and ask ourselves, if I were a benevolent spectator who was not directly involved in the outcome of the course of action, what prescription would result in the best outcome for the most number of agents. If you ask why I should do this, you are just not capable of moral agency. The original position holds that, if I were behind a veil of ignorance and unaware of my biological sex, gender, class, level of education, sexuality and other circumstances that could compromise my impartiality, then I could propose values or motivations which all rational agents, if they are not being partial, could agree to. Again asking why I should do this, excludes you from the rational and moral domain. Moral values that determine our behaviour, on both these views, can be judged rational or not from a privileged methodological position (and not just historically explained).

Both modern positions in ethics rest on the ideal of impartiality and it is obvious that a football fan should not be impartial; that impartiality is somehow anathema to being a real or proper supporter of a team. Occupying the original position or being a benevolent spectator as a model of choosing which team to support commits us to an absurd description of the supporter akin to the Rose-calcio scale described above. So, maybe, supporting a football team and being an ethical agent are just different in kind. Ethical dictates will be: impartial, universal (that is every rational agent ought to act on them and not some select group, such as Aston Villa supporters) and rational (that is logically related to the first-principles). These first-principles (act so as to maximize welfare; never coerce or exploit other free beings) are independent of particular and social commitments on the agents' part and are arrived at by asking ourselves what all human beings would endorse if they were rational (as determined by being a benevolent spectator or occupying the original position).

But, of course, the claim that supporting a football team is not rational is hardly Earth-shattering. Well, it isn't if rationality is defined as coherence with standards of right. The odd thing is that if ethics thinks of rationality in this way, then it is peculiarly 'irrational'. It is like having a Rose-etica scale which distorts our actual moral experience and makes us into agents as 'irrational' as the supporter who follows my Rose-calcio scaling procedure.

### *The rational irrationality of ethics*

If I agree that everyone's welfare matters and I can either spend my well-earned thirty pounds on a ticket to see Villa play Newcastle or I can donate it to charity, according to the benevolent spectator, it ain't going to be me benefitting and getting the pleasure from going to the match. Should I spend my time writing this chapter or helping other people? The latter would be the course of action suggested by a benevolent spectator. And the upshot is that rational ethical action is so demanding that it frustrates my own projects and plans and damages the integrity of my identity: I must commit myself so much to the welfare of others that my cares, aspirations and ambitions are sacrificed. We need to be a little egoistic or partial to members of our family and our friends over strangers even if it can't be 'rationally' justified. Otherwise we wouldn't be 'rational' as we would intuitively understand it!

Consider also the manager of a Premiership club who must needs a new striker and his son is just out of the team's youth academy. The coach knows how difficult it is to get ahead in football even if you have the talent (which his boy undoubtedly has). He stands back into the original position and applies himself to reasoning impartially and with respect for all individuals and their rights. Should he show impartiality and get his Board and the team's scouts out on the road to fill the hole in his team or should he be partial towards his son? Being a moral agent seems to commit him to doing the 'right' thing at the cost of his own family obligations. The idea of an impartial ethical agent is incoherent with a normal understanding of agency. One cannot act in a moral way unless one knows the relevance of moral distance between oneself and others, between strangers and family members, or one knows how to resolve seemingly contradictory duties in a rational way.

Finally, the rational first-principles of ethics that we can, in virtue of being a human being, all agree on from the standpoint of a rational procedure will include



prescriptions such as, “treat others with respect.” Yet, that in itself does not tell us how to behave—that is, how to actually respect others and the micro obligations such a macro prescription involves. Do we look them in the eyes or avert our eyes? Do we shake their hands or bow our heads? Do we allow them to wear their burkha or demand they cast it aside for their own liberty? The rational ethical principles that all humans, in all times and all places are supposed to agree on (that is, are universal) are so abstract that they cannot determine actual behaviour in the real world. That is left to the particularities and commitments of our social selves. Those social selves we just happen to be because of historical rather than rational reasons.

I can walk into the pub and state, “Look, I once endorsed the values of order and security, but they only scored three points on the Rose-etica scale and liberty, equality and welfare combined scored a whopping 546. So, I am now going to give all my money and time to others at the cost of my own future aspirations, never favour my family or friends over strangers and live only by abstract prescriptions untainted by social commitments. I expect you all to do the same because you are all rational.” Being rational in this sense seems to come at the cost of our own rationality.

So what if ethics were more like supporting a football team after all, would it be so irrational?

#### *Supporting a system of ethical values*

Ethical principles are in no way separate from a framework of social goods and meanings that make them intelligible. A moral agent knows how to act because he is thrown into a social tradition with all of its mores, expectations, oddities and etiquette. To bracket off the social elements of agency from the moral sphere is not only disingenuous, it also distorts how we actually reason and how we determine our behaviour in moral ways. The moral sphere cannot be isolated from the social sphere as the ‘rational’ models of ethics would have it without it becoming too demanding, susceptible to conflicts of duties or simply too abstract to actually determine an agent’s behaviour. We are thrown into a community with its values, meanings and reasons produced from a long tradition and history. And thank goodness for that, otherwise we would never know how and when to apply the expectations and nuances (such as, at times, putting ourselves before others) that truly determine our behaviour.

So, what if ethics were more like supporting a football team? What difference would it make? It would be a matter of thinking what values matter and how to apply them in a way that your peers in your society would see as ‘rational’ (like behaving in ways that identify me as an Aston Villa supporter to others). We don’t need to consult some true self separate from society, but rather a collection of others who—like ourselves—are already submerged in society. The advantages are obvious. One, it wouldn’t be too demanding: you ought to give to charity but not to such an extent that you frustrate your own personal cultivation. Two, all our duties could be prioritized and partiality towards friends and family justified (if the moral costs are negligible). And three, prescriptions will not be too abstract because they will be interpreted through a social system of meanings that determines our action effectively. If a moral agent is more like a football fan, then he can perform his duties immediately because they constitute his identity. I care because I am the father, I generate wealth because I am a unit of the market, I cheer the goal because I am an Aston Villa fan and I act morally because I am a

member of the liberal, English tradition that understands the macro value of liberty, equality and welfare as well as all the micro determinations of action that these entail.

The idea of rationality to which ethics has always aspired is akin to being a football fan in the abstract. Prescriptions would involve impersonal commitments such as: one ought to cheer when a goal is scored, one ought to attend the home games of the team one supports, and so on. But, without that little engagement on the part of the agent that states *which* team he supports, then these prescriptions cannot determine behaviour. Being an abstract football fan does not determine my behaviour one way or another.

*Where's the rationality in all that?*

There is, though, a problem. In ethics, we suppose that standing back from our immediate, contingent commitments is possible and rational and we do so because it is possible that the historical values and duties of my culture are abhorrent. We assume that even if I were born in a culture that routinely discriminates against women or tortures children, we would be able to reject such actions as wrong. Even if such actions could be justified by a system of beliefs (such as what matters is not individual welfare or liberty but social order, harmony and might), we would still deny them. By using the procedures of the original position or the benevolent spectator, we could reveal that the values are false and endorse the goods of equality, liberty and individual welfare. What if, God forbid, I were a supporter of Millwall? Are we free to support who we wish or free to change our allegiance? Am I able to—in a midlife crisis that has seen one too many defeats—give up and adopt a new, more successful team than Villa? By assuming that ethics is more akin to supporting a team than is commonly thought, then we are faced with this problem of allegiance to a tradition (or team). Just as we cannot reject Millwall (even if we should), we are also unable to reject easily the values of our culture, even if we perceive them to be unjust, wrong or unpalatable. And that is surely wrong.

The social ethics presented here contains the spectre of relativism and the challenge that one becomes a 'real' supporter at the cost of free choice. In ethical terms, the motivations of one's culture are immediately binding just because one happens to belong to that culture and not for any normative worth at all. There must, though, be an exit strategy for any supporter otherwise unethical prescriptions and injustice would be unassailable. We need to show again in what way the statement, "you ought to support Aston Villa," and, "you ought to endorse the axiomatic values of liberty, equality and respect," are rational. Remember that the latter can no longer be justified by an appeal to a special reasoning procedure because that makes the moral agent incoherent with actual moral action as we have seen above.

So, what is the alternative?

*A different kind of rationality*

When I asked whether it could be rational to support Aston Villa—that is why I (or someone else) *ought* to support Aston Villa—I concentrated on a rationality of standards, of finding the way to objectively understand the meaning of 'best' when applied to the concept 'team'. This was absurd. However, there is a different way to understand rationality. If I didn't support Aston Villa, or I didn't support any team at all, I think it would be impossible to understand and participate in watching the sport. It is a truism

that one cannot be neutral whilst watching football and enjoy it: the natural experience is to, very early on in a match, 'take sides'. And this is rational because otherwise those forms of behaviour associated with being a football fan would not be possible.

Supporting a team is rational because it allows the agent to watch the game. Supporting one particular team means I can choose which game to watch on TV, when to sacrifice watching a game to take my kids down the park (only if Aston Villa aren't playing!) and decide who I would most enjoy talking to in the pub. Social commitment of this sort makes rational action possible since without this prerequisite of choosing a team I would be unable to act in so many ways.

This sort of rationality can be carried over to ethics. The social commitment to traditional values (liberty, equality, welfare) and all the micro obligations and values these entail (specific ethico-social commitments) enable the agent to be moral. Social and cultural involvements allow me to order and prioritize my desires: I learn when to respect others and what is most important to me and others. I learn when I shouldn't do what I most want to do or, at least, I learn when to put it on hold for another day. Through society, I learn when to put others before myself and when not to. I learn when to do things for others and how to gain their trust and also earn and repay their trust in me. Through a moral culture, I know immediately what is right and good without having to stand back and reason, which would make my actions in the world slow and ponderous. I just keep my promises, and hold doors open for others, without having to decide whether this is good or right at each moment of the day. If I wasn't a member of a moral culture, if I didn't just support some values, then I just couldn't be moral at all. And that is surely a measure of its rationality.

*Hold on a minute again...*

But surely, just as supporting any team, enables you to understand football, so endorsing any values whatsoever will make you moral. Even if I endorse the values of order, harmony and might, then I am rational. This seems to suggest there can be no rational preference for one society over another as there can be no rational preference for one team over another.

There is no rational preference for one team over another, however, because supporting any team will allow you to make the sort of rational choices a football supporter ought to make. But supporting a rugby team or a cricket team will distort your experience and engagement with the game of football (without, it should be noted, making it impossible to participate but only in some rather confused, erroneous way). Correspondingly, not all societies and systems of values will allow you to make the sorts of rational choices a moral agent ought to make. Why not?

Think once more of the example of the society that discriminates against women because they don't know what is best for them or because social order is more important than individual liberty and equality. Participation in such a society allows agents to be moral and so it seems to be rational. However, these agents may well be only *partially* moral. It is akin to supporting rugby (or NFL) and watching football. It will allow action that simulates aspects of moral action, but is at base a distortion of what moral experience should be because it does not allow all individuals of that society to learn the prerequisites of morality as called for by a moral culture. A bit like cheering when a goal is scored because it is like a try (or touchdown) being scored. The learned behaviour from

corrupted relationships generated by this model will generate historical conflicts that will demand resolution: one can easily imagine that a society that puts the state's order before individual needs will face demands from those individuals when it expects their allegiance, or a society that discriminates against women may well generate conflicts for enlightened husbands who wish to put their wife's needs before those of their male colleagues. Again, 'like' not seeing anything wrong in a full-blown shoulder charge on the football pitch because it wouldn't be condemned on the rugby (or NFL) pitch. Such societies won't be fully rational because moral agency won't be truly possible: the agent will not know how to act in certain situations and will, at times, find the prescriptions of that society either nonsensical or contradictory.

*So why do I support Aston Villa?*

Is it rational to be an Aston Villa supporter? If you mean, "Does it meet some standard of objective rightness or truth?" then the answer is no. But, if you mean, "Does it make sense and is it a worthwhile pursuit to support Aston Villa?" then yes. And there are two levels to ethical questions. "Is it wrong to torture children?" The answer is yes according to standards of rightness central to society. "Is it rational to endorse these social values?" Well, if you mean, "Do they meet some further standard of objective rightness or truth?" then the answer is no. But, if you mean, "Do these values lead to the possibility of moral agency and moral action?" then the answer is yes. We sometimes mix these two levels of rationality up.

Let us return to a more pressing issue: why do I support Aston Villa? I said there is no rational preference for one team over another; it is just rational to support a team at all. And that is true even if it is based on an error. And I think that my support grew from seeing a sticker of a West Ham player in my brother's 1976 Panini sticker book and (not being able to read) telling my Dad I supported the team in those colours (claret and blue). He wrongly thought I meant Aston Villa. And so I am an Aston Villa supporter.

And even that is rational in a certain sense.

*Further reading*

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